Chapter 6

Etherotopia or a Country in the Mind: Bridging the Gap between Utopias and Nirvanas

Christos Callow Jr.

Utopia Here and Now

Joyce Hertzler concludes his *History of Utopian Thought* with the phrase 'Utopia is not a social state it is a state of mind'.[1] Other utopian scholars would argue that the truth is exactly the opposite, that utopia is a purely social matter. There seems to be a false dilemma here where one must choose between two, seemingly conflicting, schools of utopian thinking: social utopias and private ones. In John Carey's words, 'Whereas most utopias reform the world, some reform the self'.[2] He says of the later that these 'solitary utopians are Robinson Crusoes of the mind, inventing islands for themselves to inhabit' and that they are very unlike 'normal, public-spirited utopians'.[3]

Note here the distinction between the 'normal, public-spirited' utopianism and the solitary one; the kind that takes place within the individual's mind and, for doing so, is denied any social value. In his work, Hertzler notices this problem when comparing utopianism to religion. He writes: 'Among the various Utopians …, two ideals reigned – ideals seemingly negations of each other. … The first ideal is the future of the human race in this world; the other is the future of the individual in another world hereafter'.[4] Hertzler however believes those are essentially the same in everything but the end: 'the specific end alone is different, and that is of minor significance'.[5]

---

[1] Joyce Oramel Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965), 314.

[2] John Carey, ed. *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), xix.

[3] Carey, *Faber*, xx.

[4] Hertzler. *History*, 262.

[5] Hertzler. *History*, 262.

It seems to me that an inner, personal utopianism is commonly presented as a false alternative to the 'proper' social utopianism; when it is not, it is preached in the form of a religion. But these two perspectives are not necessarily the only options. In my view, there is no reason to exclude the possibility of a combination; a third school of utopianism that would reform both the world and the self. Speaking of a utopianism that functions on both levels, personal and social, Hertzler mentions Jesus' idea of the Kingdom of God where 'to separate the inner lives of individuals from the social order was really impossible, for they react upon one another always and inevitably'.[6] Should we accept this argument – and I think it would be illogical not to, unless we believe that society doesn't consist of individuals – we would come to realise that there never was a dilemma in the first place.

That being said, it should be clarified that by a utopianism that demands both social and personal reconstruction to be fulfilled, one does not necessarily refer to a religion, but rather to a utopianism that functions as religion. This would be a more advanced theory than social utopianism. Perhaps this is closer to what Levitas defines as utopia when she says that 'Utopia entails not just the fictional depiction of a better society, but the assertion of a radical change of values'.[7] This 'radical change of values', this *transformation*, if you like, is an essential element of a mature utopian vision.

Another problem with the strictly social utopianisms is that the individual, especially the theorist, is unable to put the theory into practice in his or her everyday life. As a result, the social utopian scholar's work ends at entertaining the idea and justifies Nietzsche's Zarathustra who calls scholars people who 'want to be mere spectators in everything' and 'like those who stand in the street and stare at the people passing by, so they too wait and stare at thoughts that others have thought'.[8] On the contrary, the religious utopian scholar's work merely begins with the theory and continues with their activity in the actual world.

---

[6] Hertzler, *History*, 71.

[7] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (London: Philip Allan, 1990), 124.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 147.

That is because this school of thought is founded on the principle that the individual's relationship with him- or her-self is in fact a social issue, as it defines their role in society. I will return to this later.

In *Something's Missing*, a discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, Bloch argues that: At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future.[9] Here Bloch refers to utopia as a place and utopia as a time but one could respond that a much older idea is that of utopia as a person – more accurately, a state of mind – which may also be described as nirvana. It is this utopianism that I explore in this chapter: a utopia that does not require an alternate space or time, and may thus be created – or at least start its development – right here and now.

From a purely social perspective, the quest for nirvana might seem irrelevant to utopia. That is, if in our mind, consciousness does not occupy social space. There is good reason however why nirvana has been depicted in Buddhism as a city; Hallisey refers to a 'conventional metaphor that "defines" existential conditions as "places"',[10] much like the Kingdom of God is described, symbolically of course, as a kingdom.[11]

In what way then, it may be asked, would either nirvana or the Christian Kingdom apply to society? Again such a question would imply a total disconnection between the personal and the social. In the religious utopianist's view, the personal issue is social and vice versa. In *Buddha, Marx and God*, Trevor Ling explains why this is the case (at least for the case of Buddhism, though this applies to Christian utopianism as well): The only thing that Buddhism can never be is a *private* affair, since in the

---

[9] Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 3.

[10] Charles Hallisey, 'Nibbānasutta: An Allegedly Non-Canonical Sutta on Nibbāna as a Great City'. *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, Vol. XVIII (1993), 113.

[11] See Luke 17:21 (Authorised King James Version): 'Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you'.

Buddhist view there are no private individuals. The aim of Buddhism is inherently *social* in its concern; it is to bring all men to nirvana; this objective concerns society as a whole.[12]

Nirvana First

In my view, utopia is the nirvana of society and nirvana is the utopia of the person; in the sense that the two concepts can be read as synonymous, since we have established that nirvana is as social a goal as utopia. Since nirvana is more suitable a concept when referring to a utopian state of mind, I will be using this parallel throughout the remainder of this chapter. It would be useful here to give a definition of nirvana, in order to avoid misinterpretation. The following quote is from *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* by Damien Keown:

> 'Nirvana' literally means 'quenching' or 'blowing out', in the way that the flame of a candle is blown out. But what is it that is 'blown out'? Is it one's soul, one's ego, one's identity? It cannot be the soul that is blown out, since Buddhism denies that any such thing exists. Nor is it the ego or one's sense of identity that disappears, although nirvana certainly involves a radically transformed state of consciousness which is free of the obsession with 'me and mine'.[13]

That would be the ideal state of mind for a utopian theorist, as it is difficult to even imagine utopia without having been liberated first – or, if you prefer, un-blinded – from personal obsessions, desires, addictions, traumas and so on. Otherwise, the result will be the continuous spread of more and more separatist utopias that favour one race over the other, one culture over the other, one gender over the other, one nation over some or all others.

At this point, I would like to draw a parallel between the wish to achieve utopia – social or personal or, ideally, both – and the wish for another type of perfection, immortality. Stephen R. L. Clark's response to the wish of immortality, in *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy*, adds another level of complexity to utopian theorising. Clark says:

---

[12] Trevor Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God: Some Aspects of Religion in the Modern World*. 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1979), 83.

[13] Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51.

> The wish to be immortal, if it is to be rational, must be a wish to merit, or be capable of, such immortality. It would be a disastrous idea for the wicked, including the 'ordinarily wicked' (which is most of us). So if we wish ourselves immortal we must in reason wish ourselves 'deserving' of immortality. Conversely, if we wish ourselves thus 'deserving' we must wish ourselves immortal: it would make little sense not to want what we have wanted to deserve.[14]

To translate this to utopian terms, it follows that a) before we demand utopia, we must first deserve it; in other words if we find ourselves in a utopian society without being utopian ourselves, we would be but parasites – quite possibly we would also be unable to appreciate that utopia; b) in order for our minds to become of the same quality as their utopian product, we must aim to achieve that 'radically transformed state of consciousness', nirvana.

In his analysis of nirvana, Clark states that 'the term is popularly used, in newspapers, simply to mean the fulfilment of desire. In Buddhist origin it means the *extinction* of desire'.[15] The same should apply to utopianism: it is the extinction of desire, not its fulfilment that is utopian. Otherwise, the utopian citizen would be as dependent on utopia for their frequent dose of satisfactions as a dystopian[16] would. I would therefore argue that utopia itself cannot be a direct fulfilment of desire or need: it ought to be a new condition that comes almost automatically as a natural result of individual and, subsequently, cultural evolution. I will come back to this near the end of the chapter.

I have so far presented the quest for nirvana and the quest for utopia as parallel paths to the same direction. Once the parallels have been drawn, it seems almost impossible to think of them as two conflicting objectives. At the same time, there is the problem raised by Bertolt Brecht in his play *The*

---

[14] Stephen R. L. Clark, *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995), 20.

[15] Clark, *Live Forever*, 23.

[16] Here I refer to a Huxleian, rather than an Orwellian, dystopia that is sustained by keeping its citizens satisfied. It seems to me that those who ask for a utopia that would merely keep them entertained might as well welcome a dystopia that would do the same.

Good Person of Szechwan: 'the impossibility of being good in a corrupt world'[17] – or, in utopian terms, to be a utopian citizen in a dystopian city – and so to achieve nirvana one would have to wait for the social utopia.[18] On the other hand, if a social utopia can only be brought by those who have a proper utopian vision and thus the necessary clarity of mind to host that vision, then maybe it is the other way round after all. It seems hard to argue with Brecht, but the two religions I am referring to here would claim not only that being good in an evil world is possible, but to be good in an already good world would hardly be an achievement. It is a complicated situation and one can never be entirely sure about which is the right place to start, utopia or nirvana. The only answer, it seems to me, is that, unlike the social utopia, the personal utopia may be achieved right here and now. The person that seeks a social utopia may end up waiting forever but the one who is after the personal utopia can start practicing right now. Maybe that person, like another Buddha, would have the conceivability to spot the path to the social utopia while those still 'blinded' by 'the obsession with "me and mine"'[19] may not. I would argue that in our quest for a universal utopia, our own nirvana must be our first priority.

My argument is that 'Nirvana First' is the starting point of the religious utopianist. Just as Buddha started preaching nirvana *after* achieving nirvana, it follows that the utopian's first task is to become a utopia themselves before preaching it. This logic is common sense in Zen Buddhism. In his classic work, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Herrigel warns that 'Zen can only be understood by one who is himself a mystic and is therefore not tempted to gain by underhand methods what the mystical experience withholds from him'.[20]

---

[17] Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 118.

[18] Brecht's message, I understand, is that to be good one must first struggle for a society which will allow its members to be good. The paradox is that to bring 'good' social change, those who revolt against the corrupt society must be un-corrupted already or the utopian struggle might lead to yet another dystopia.

[19] Keown, *Buddhism*, 51.

[20] Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 20–21.

The same applies to utopianism. As we have not experienced utopia, we are not in the position to provide arguments from experience. Arguments must therefore come from *logic* and in order to have access to logic, the self must go; more accurately, the selfish ambitions, desires, preoccupations and everything else that adds to prejudice. The Zen Koan, *A Cup of Tea*, may be of use here. According to it, the Japanese master Nan-in 'received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen'. (In our case, a utopian scholar who would inquire about utopia.) Nan-in serves him tea, pours his cup and keeps pouring even after the cup is filled. The professor complains and Nan-in replies that, like this cup, 'you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'[21] In the same way, the utopian mind must be ready to give up one's own vision of utopia should a better one appear (even if that utopia wouldn't include him or her). This means that our utopian vision must develop along with ourselves. The more we'd approach nirvana or our own utopia of the mind, the closer we'd be to understanding what utopia should be like.

Another point that I find of interest here is one of Nietzsche's arguments against theism, but this applies to other absolutes and ideals as well. He writes in *Zarathustra*:

> God is a supposition: but I want your supposing to be bounded by conceivability. [As a thought-experiment, replace the word 'God' with utopia.] Could you *conceive* a god? But may the will to truth mean this to you: that everything shall be transformed into the humanly-conceivable, the humanly-evident, the humanly-palpable! You should follow your own senses to the end![22]

One of the main problems with the above approach is that instead of asking his people to expand their mind to include ideas they cannot currently conceive or comprehend, Zarathustra asks them to limit their minds to the humanly-conceivable, the humanly-evident, etcetera; so if there is something one cannot grasp, they are advised not to try to understand, but to give up the effort and 'follow [their] own

---

[21] Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, eds. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (Boston: Tuttle, 1998), 19.

[22] Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 110.

senses to the end'. The same problem affects utopianism and everything that seems to go beyond the familiar experience; this is the fear of the unknown labelled as reason or common sense. Logically speaking, Nietzsche's argument can easily be proven false: for instance, the earth was round even before people conceived its roundness and natural laws like gravity do not rely on our conceivability either. Furthermore, this school of thought excludes the possibility of nirvana which demands that the mind changes radically and develops the ability to conceive truths previously impossible to grasp.

The reason why this argument is nevertheless useful, even though anti-utopian at its core, is that it is based on an objective truth; supposing is indeed bounded by conceivability. For Nietzsche, this means no more supposing, but perhaps it should mean that conceivability requires practice. This is why I argue that nirvana or inner utopia is the necessary first step towards a social or outer utopia.

It is impossible to build utopia if we have not already conceived it and to conceive it we must first reach that state of mind that is capable of such conceiving. As Kateb writes: 'we need bold utopian thought that is general and radical, that builds on novel capacities and takes the measure of novel problems, but goes beyond them in its exploration of the human condition and the requirements for at least approximating utopia'.[23] The key concept here is that this utopian thought goes beyond solving our own current problems and deals with the human condition itself. This is why we need nirvana or enlightenment or, if you prefer, the 'kingdom within'. The problem with social utopianism is its expiry date. Supposedly, after it would solve poverty, hunger, inequality and so on, it would simply expire. True utopianism, it seems to me, cannot have an expiry date. It should struggle not merely to solve temporary problems, but to continue to greater depths and deal with existential issues. This is why I believe that nirvana may not only bring utopia, but also sustain it; in other words, nirvana is meaningful *after* Utopia as well.

After Utopia

[23] George Kateb, ed. *Utopia: The Potential and Prospect of the Human Condition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 23–4.

The question 'after utopia, what?' can be used as an argument against utopianism in two ways: firstly, to claim that utopia, even if achieved, cannot be maintained and secondly – as Eugene Ionesco sees it – as certainty that the social utopia, once achieved, will create more chaos than there ever was before. Ionesco's argument is very strong (here he refers to his play *The Bald Prima Donna*):

> The 'society' I have tried to depict in *The Bald Prima Donna* is a society which is perfect, I mean where all social problems have been resolved. Unfortunately this has no effect upon life as it is lived. The play deals with a world where economic worries are a thing of the past, a universe without mystery, in which everything runs smoothly, for one section of humanity at least. … I believe that it is precisely when we see the last of economic problems and class warfare … that we shall also see that this solves nothing, indeed that our problems are only beginning. We can no longer avoid asking ourselves what we are doing here on earth, and how, having no deep sense of our destiny, we can endure the crushing weight of the material world.[24]

This is an interesting response to utopianism in general but it has mainly to do with social utopianism's expiry date. It is also to do with conceivability and whether we are able now, before utopia, to imagine our post-utopian condition. It is paradoxical, but this would be like a pre-nirvana Buddha trying to answer questions that only the post-nirvana Buddha is supposed to understand. To put it in simpler terms, it would be like a researcher decided the outcome of their research before it even began.

However, I claim that Ionesco is not wrong. Indeed, when all the secondary social problems are resolved, humanity will have to deal with the primary, permanent ones. This is not necessarily a negative outcome, because inevitably we have to address the issues of our existence. In that, utopia can function like a collective nirvana; just like nirvana is supposed to clear our mind from our everyday troubles so that we can understand our lives in depth, so should utopia resolve the social problems in order for people to be able to focus on the age old questions. This is the stage when social utopianism proves insufficient. For Ionesco this would be the most difficult phase of mankind, but he gives no answer here on where this

[24] Eugene Ionesco, 'The World of Ionesco' (*The Tulane Drama Review*, 3.1, 1958), 46.

path might ultimately lead. Another writer, much grimmer in his vision, offers an answer to this post-realisation problem. In his famous story, *The Call of Cthulhu*, H.P. Lovecraft declares:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.[25]

I would like here to refer to the following statement by Paul Tillich: 'we discovered that all utopias are negations of negation – the denial of what is negative in human existence'.[26] It follows that if we accept Lovecraft's view of the cosmos, utopianism would only work as deception, since in this case human existence would be a negative condition.

This is yet more evidence that utopianism is bound by conceivability. I want here to discuss this in more depth. I will use as an example the last chapter of the *History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* by Julian Barnes, as analysed by John Carey in *The Faber Book of Utopias*. Here the character – and first-person narrator – finds himself dead, waking up in Paradise. This version of Paradise is a literal interpretation where an angelic woman who introduces herself as 'room service'[27] brings the character everything he desires, starting with the breakfast of his life.[28] Carey describes it as 'a heaven where every wish is instantly gratified', where the protagonist 'cruises on an electric buggy round heaven's commodity-crammed supermarket, buying up vast cargoes of luxury, with no spending limit. He meets all the famous people he wants. He has sex every night with beautiful women. When he plays golf, he can

---

[25] Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*. Ed. Stephen Jones (London: Gollancz, 2008), 201.

[26] Paul Tillich, *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), 168.

[27] Quoted in Carey, *Faber*, 483.

[28] Carey, *Faber*, 483.

hole in one every time'.[29] When asking for God, he learns that God exists if he wants him to exist and doesn't if he doesn't want him to.[30] Predictably enough, in this version of Heaven the dead eventually get bored and 'miss things going wrong. Some of them ask for pain', others for bad weather and so on. They even have 'the option to die off if they want to'.[31] The narrator asks: 'And what percentage of people take up the option to die off?' She looked at me levelly, her glance telling me to be calm. 'Oh, a hundred per cent, of course. Over many thousands of years, calculated by old time, of course. But yes, everyone takes the option, sooner or later'.[32] Needless to say, this school of thought is anti-utopianism at its core. I find this to be flawed on many levels. First of all, it is a literal interpretation of Heaven as physical space. Secondly, it is an over-simplistic interpretation where Heaven is merely that place where all wishes come true. Thirdly, a soul that plays golf, has sex every night and enjoys the breakfast they serve in Heaven, while somehow maintaining the same senses and desires he/she/it had in life, is an example of poor conceivability.

Poor conceivability creates problems in social utopianism too. Would we not be bored in utopia, asks the anti-utopian, unable to accept that in utopia we would be different people with different needs with different perceptions of time, space, life and so on. We don't know what nirvana or utopia is like because we haven't been there yet. It is not shameful to admit that our conceivability is limited by our experience, our five physical senses, etcetera; but it is unreasonable to follow Zarathustra in denouncing everything we're unable to conceive. Even worse, as in the above example, is to have the arrogance to bring utopia down to our level when we should be attempting the opposite.

It should be easy to understand that Paradise has to be interpreted as a place due to our imperfect conceivability and yet that *it is not*. It is often not helpful to interpret religions literally (in which case 'thy

---

[29] Carey, *Faber*, 484.

[30] Carey, *Faber*, 485.

[31] Quoted in Carey, *Faber*, 486.

[32] Quoted in Carey, *Faber*, 487.

kingdom come'[33] would come by means of transport and 'love thy neighbour'[34] would refer to the people of the same neighbourhood). Of course Paradise cannot be a 'place' in the sense that a kitchen or a cinema is a place. Paradise is supposedly a place for souls – souls that are without bodies, and therefore spirits that don't occupy physical space, that are infinite. It would make more sense if Paradise, though necessarily conceived as a place, is something entirely different; more like a condition of the spirit. It follows that bodiless spirits would not feel hunger, for instance, but would have different needs which we are not in the position to imagine. Of course this is mere speculation, but to present Heaven as a big white cloudy room where an angelic genie fulfils the sensual needs of spirits without sensual needs is at least an unsuccessful metaphor.

This again affects utopianism. The anti-utopian will argue that after utopia we would be terribly bored, since there would no longer be any problems to solve and thus, nothing to do. However, like the allegory of Paradise, we are not in the position to conceive after utopia as we haven't yet had it. A different situation means different needs and life after utopia must surely be a very unfamiliar situation. I would like here to return to the discussion of that religious utopianism which for both etymological and aesthetical reasons I define as *Etherotopia*.

Defining Etherotopia

Etherotopia, or Aetherotopia, etymologically means *Αιθέριος Τόπος* (Ethereal Place). I imagine the metaphysical side of the concept would be a place defined not as a form and by its limits, like a physical space would be, but as an existential condition. Speaking metaphysically then, the Christian Kingdom would be an Etherotopia or, if you like, a 'country in the mind'. But the focus of this chapter is the paradise on earth which would be, what I previously described, the kind of utopianism that is not limited to the social aspect but deals with the personal as well as the universal; this is what is meant by Etherotopia.

[33] Luke 11:2 (Authorised King James Version).

[34] Matthew 19:19 (Authorised King James Version).

I should note that by a religious utopianism (and, to be clear, this concept is not the same as a religious utopia[35]), I am simply referring to a system of utopian thought that would *function* as a religion. How, one may ask, could this actually come to life. It'd be tempting to assume that a system whose first priority is the development of the individual mind towards nirvana or other such seemingly theoretical conditions, could be nothing more than a theory. Yet I would argue that more than any social utopianism, the Etherotopian approach would be the most practical. Consider Hertzler's comment on More's *Utopia*: More's happy land is based, not upon desire, but upon the disdain of desire. He would have complete detachment from all our pre-occupation over mine and thine, for then much of the occasion for theft, envy and ambition would be banished and all could devote themselves to that which is best.[36] This 'detachment' is identical with what Keown describes as being 'free of the obsession with "me and mine"'.[37] This would then be a philosophy of life that deals with the source of social injustice itself, rather that its symptoms. It would be impossible to maintain a utopia of non-utopian thinkers either way and it follows that only utopian thinkers could create utopia in the first place. As to how such a philosophy would secure utopia, it is easily explained by Hertzler. He adds in his analysis of *Utopia* that 'because of this education and healthful life, ignorance, the great cause of crime and misery, is banished'.[38] This makes most laws unnecessary, thus 'the laws in Utopia are few, because it is against all right and justice that men have imposed on them laws'.[39]

But apart from *preserving* utopia (and I would like to think that utopia can only be a work-in-progress; Hertzler is being realistic when he mentions that 'Humanity's perfection will never be attained;

---

[35] A religious utopia would necessarily be a religious utopian society while a religious utopianism need not have religious content.

[36] Hertzler, *History*, 135.

[37] Keown, *Buddhism*, 51.

[38] Hertzler, *History*, 142.

[39] Hertzler, *History*, 142.

it is only possible to work toward it'[40] and thus preserving is not the right word; the right word would be 'improving'), this school of thought could efficiently *construct* it. Here it is useful to repeat that Etherotopianism functions as a religion and to explain in more detail the reason. Ling claims that 'religion always implies *action* of some kind'[41] and more importantly, adds that: 'what is done has *significance*. A meaning has been perceived, in the world and in human existence, and the way a man relates his own life or the life of his people to this meaning is religion'.[42]

The Zen Master Taisen Deshimaru provides another insightful point. He states: '*True religion means harmonizing with what is outside, with society, with everything around us.* That is the right place for the *bodhisattva*, the monk'.[43] I would like to develop this further. A typical argument against religious systems is that they are mere escapisms.[44] But the Buddhist concept of *bodhisattva*, 'the person who remains in "the world" by choice, to help other people rather than to devote himself or herself to a personal salvation',[45] demonstrates that traditional religion wants its followers to contribute to society's utopian development. This is essential in Christianity as well. Jesus emphasised 'the sense of *individual responsibility*. … He would have none of that flimsy fatalism which regards character as the creature of circumstance, but appealed to the will of men'.[46]

---

[40] Hertzler, *History*, 307.

[41] Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, 208.

[42] Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, 209.

[43] Taisen Deshimaru, *Questions to a Zen Master: Practical and Spiritual Answers from the Great Japanese Master* (London: Rider, 1985), 25.

[44] This applies mostly to western society. There's an interesting observation by Deshimaru: 'Westerners like to be on one side or the other; either they are all for religion or they detest it – always the same old story of oppositions. What we must do is harmonize religion with communism, American assets with the Arab spirit. … there needs to be a theory in between' (Deshimar, *Questions*, 7–8).

[45] Deshimaru, *Questions*, viii.

[46] Hertzler, *History*, 82.

Speaking on individual responsibility, one of the main themes of this chapter is the utopian theorist's responsibility to the practice of their theory. Religion has its bodhisattvas and so should utopianism. An excellent approach to how this utopian *apostle* would go from studying and lecturing to practicing utopianism is described in Book Nine of Plato's *Republic*. Here Socrates responds to the argument that his ideal society could be found nowhere on earth with the following statement: 'But in heaven … perhaps, a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn't make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other'.[47] The argument here – and clearly in disagreement with Brecht – is that regardless of whether utopia exists, the utopian must live in this world here and now according to that utopia's philosophy. This way, at the very least, Etherotopia gains one citizen.

Here I would like to return to Hertzler's interpretation of the 'Kingdom of God'. This is how Hertzler introduces Jesus' utopianism:

> Jesus was both sociological and revolutionary in his point of view. He was interested in folks and their relationships and not in theology or ritual or ecclesiastical orders. … He intimated that there was to be a church, but he gave almost no instructions respecting its constitution or its laws. He fought all that belittles and degrades human beings, all that breaks up society into opposing classes and clashing creeds, and attempted to cultivate all that makes for the realization of self and the knowledge of the divinely ordained social order, with its pure, noble and beneficent life.[48]

Hertzler later focuses on the socio-political aspect of Jesus' teachings, namely that he 'gave full recognition to the law of development in human life' and that he 'had caught the vision of a gradually established regenerated society, looking not only to personal perfection, but also to the establishment of a

---

[47] Bloom, Allan. *The Republic of Plato: Translated with Notes and an Interpretative Essay by Allan Bloom*. 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991). IX, 592b.

[48] Hertzler, *History*, 68.

Society, pure, blessed and world-wide'.[49] It is this synthesis of personal and social perfection that is the essence of the Etherotopian theory presented here.

More importantly, the main reason Etherotopia functions as a religion rather than as a socio-political system is the path it takes. A socio-political system reconstructs society from the outside; it begins working inwards, from the system itself towards the individual, thus forcing a utopian model in a dystopian, Procrustean, manner. It is also possible that social utopianism misses – or postpones *ad infinitum* – the perfection of its individuals. This utopianism is doomed to fail as the individual cannot tolerate it, being unable to understand it due to lack of relevant utopian education that would need to occur *before* the enforcement of the utopian system, which is impossible.

Instead, Etherotopia would change society from the inside outward, from the particular to the universal. Consider the Christian approach as explained by Hertzler: 'for Jesus the Kingdom was to come not by outward force, or social organization or apocalyptic dream, but by the progressive sanctification of individual human beings'.[50] This school of thought aims to create the utopians prior to building the utopian city; rather it starts building the city by creating the utopians. As previously stated, this is the first priority of Etherotopianism: nirvana first, utopia later.

I understand this approach goes against the flow of traditional social utopianism. This means that we start by imagining the utopian citizen, then construct the utopian city around that model. It also means that we can begin doing this now. Our first utopian experiment would then be our own selves. Utopianism is too serious a subject to be merely theorised. Consider the example of Marxist studies: arguably nothing postpones, weakens or even prevents revolution more efficiently than teaching it. There needs to be a way to go beyond theorising utopia, beyond the limits of academic conceivability. Utopianism is, inevitably, in the hands of utopian theorists who are, more than any other citizen, responsible individually and as a group for society's potential transition to utopia. Action is required and what Etherotopianism demands is

[49] Hertzler, *History*, 71.

[50] Hertzler, *History*, 71.

that it starts exclusively as individual responsibility. If utopianism as a vision of mankind, as wisdom even, may function as another type of nirvana, then its aim would be to bring all people to utopian conceivability (to paraphrase Ling's quote 'the aim … is to bring all men to nirvana'[51]).

To speak of changing the world without changing ourselves is at least hypocritical, let alone impractical. This can only work as a religious procedure, because a religion is a school of thought that can be practiced at both personal and social level. The way this actually works is best described by Hertzler's example of the Kingdom of God:

> The Kingdom of God is thus seen to be an evolving – a gradual process of social and spiritual progress. It begins in the hearts and lives of men and does not end until the spirit of God rules in every institution and relation of life. It is both a subjective state of the soul and an objective social order. It is a growth, a development, the unfolding of a principle of life, in its subjective as well as its objective phases.[52]

This then is the bridge between utopia(s) and nirvana(s); a utopianism that is both that 'subjective state of the soul' (or you may replace the word *soul* with *mind*) and 'an objective social order'. And thus it is clear that utopia and nirvana complete each other and are part of the same vision for an ideal society that consists of ideal people. And since this utopianism is both a private and a public quest, it follows that Etherotopianism, as a procedure, begins the moment we start thinking about it.

References

Bloch, Ernst. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988.

Bloom, Allan. *The Republic of Plato: Translated with Notes and an Interpretative Essay by Allan Bloom*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Carey, John, ed. *The Faber Book of Utopias*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

Clark, Stephen R.L. *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1995.

[51] Ling, *Buddha, Marx and God*, 1979, 83.

[52] Hertzler, *History*, 71–72

Deshimaru, Taisen. *Questions to a Zen Master: Practical and Spiritual Answers from the Great Japanese Master*. London: Rider, 1985.

Hallisey, Charles. 'Nibbānasutta: An Allegedly Non-Canonical Sutta on Nibbāna as a Great City'. *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, Vol. XVIII (1993): 97–130.

Herrigel, Eugen. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.

Hertzler, Joyce Oramel. *The History of Utopian Thought.* New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1965.

Ionesco, Eugene. 'The World of Ionesco'. *The Tulane Drama Review*, 3.1 (1958): 46–8.

Kateb, George, ed. *Utopia: The Potential and Prospect of the Human Condition.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008.

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. London: Philip Allan, 1990.

Ling, Trevor. *Buddha, Marx and God: Some Aspects of Religion in the Modern World*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1979.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft*. Ed. Stephen Jones. London: Gollancz, 2008.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1969.

Reps, Paul, and Nyogen Senzaki, eds. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*. Boston: Tuttle, 1998.

The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments. Authorised King James Version. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Thomson, Peter, and Glendyr Sacks, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Tillich, Paul. *Political Expectation*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971.